



Burning Issues

National and local forest fire management policy in the US Part I – Are our forests “sick”?

By John S. Peters, College of Charleston, Dept of Biology



While fire has always helped shape our landscape, today’s fires are not those of the past; they are often hotter, more destructive, and more dangerous to fight. In recent years, most of us have seen televised pictures of wild land fires, evacuated communities, burned homes, and blackened forests, or witnessed these first hand. In part, the reason for the difference is that many of today’s forests often have unprecedented levels of flammable materials including among other materials: underbrush, needles and leaves.

A century ago a ponderosa pine forest may have had some 25 mature trees per acre and be easily traversed on horseback or by a horse-drawn wagon. Today the same forest may have more than 1,000 trees on the same acre, creating conditions that are much too thick for the passage of a hiker. These tightly packed trees are smaller, weaker, more disease prone and more susceptible to insect attack than their ancestors. Such forests form huge reservoirs of fuel awaiting ignition, and pose a particularly significant threat when drought is also a factor. (The US Dept of Agriculture: Forest Service: <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/hfi/>).

Questions to consider as you identify learning issues:

1. Why are forests so “unhealthy” today?
2. Are forest fires bad? Why or why not?



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National and local forest fire management policy in the US Part 2 - Forest thinning: Firefighting or logging?

By John S. Peters, College of Charleston, Dept of Biology



Decades of suppressing fires' natural cycles have allowed an accumulation of undergrowth that is a key fuel for wildfires. The situation is compounded by areas that have been clear cut and replaced with closely spaced, valuable timber. The Forest Service has estimated that 190 million acres of forest in the United States is susceptible to fires.

In 2002, the massive Biscuit Fire raged through forests in Oregon and California for four months, turning a half-million acres of brush and timber into ash. By the end of the year, more than 7 million acres of federal and private forest land had burned. Then came the Southern California wildfires, which scorched nearly 750,000 acres during the fall of 2003, killing 22 people and destroying more than 3,600 homes. The almost 140 thousand acre Hayman fire the same year was 5 times bigger than any other fire in Colorado's modern history, and forced the evacuation of 80 communities. The McNally fire burned close to 150 thousand acres and threatened endangered old growth Giant Sequoias in California (The US Dept of Agriculture: Forest Service: <http://www.fs.fed.us/projects/hfi/>).

President George Bush used the devastation to promote more logging in national forests as a way to prevent similar disasters and boost local economies, and recently signed the first forest-management law in decades, paving the way for tree-removal projects on 20 million acres of federal land. The measure authorizes \$760 million annually to prevent the kind of wildfires that have scorched the drought-plagued Western states. The new law speeds up environmental and judicial reviews to hasten removal of overgrown brush and diseased trees.

The White House, environmental groups and loggers all agree that forest-management policy is a mess after a century of fire suppression. Where they differ is the central issue in the nation's battle with wildfires and forests: how to thin millions of acres of public land to reduce the risk of fire. Many fire experts say removing brush and trees from some forests can help control fires. Other experts say fires are part of a forest's natural cycle and that thinning is not a substitute.

Critics of the new law say that increased spending is needed, but that the plan plays on the public's fear of wildfires and will do little to protect at-risk homes and communities. According to Mike Englert of the American Lands Alliance, the law focuses mainly on fire management on federal land, but a Forest Service analysis showed that 92 percent of the area presenting a risk to communities is non-federal land. Moreover, the Sierra Club argues that the funding mechanism for the program is flawed. Logging companies are allowed to keep trees that they remove during thinning and also log public lands that otherwise would not be open to clearing in payment for "managing" a forest to prevent fire. This is powerful incentive for logging companies to clear large old growth trees which are usually fire-resistant and only in commercially valuable forests, rather than smaller more flammable trees near houses, all in the name of fire prevention.

Moreover, they argue that there is evidence that forest thinning practices of logging companies actually increase the likelihood of forest fires, and do other damage to forests that affect wildlife and aesthetic value.

Proponents of the measure, argue that the procedures required to begin important forest thinning projects are hampered by confusion, costs and delays of required consultations and studies; procedural requirements that create disincentives for logging companies to help the federal agencies manage forests; overly burdensome paperwork that creates confusion and misapplication of required procedures; and excessive exposure of project proposals to litigation from appeals by citizens and environmental groups. They argue that all of this contributes to long delays in implementing needed forest thinning, and imposes costs that could be better spent on forest ecosystem resoration.

Do you think that laws should protect the rights and encourage citizens to directly influence local forest management practices. Why?

Do you think environmental protection and litigation...should be lessened in order to make it easier for the government to work with logging companies to thin forests that are as risk for catastrophic fires? Why?

Assignment – Get involved

Here are some ways!

Sierra Club Web site

Write a letter to your congressman – give addresses

Write a letter to the post and courier about the sale of Francis Marion Forest

Do you or your family live in an area that is at risk for forest fire. Develop a plan for protecting/managing your land.